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ABSTRACT

The Integrated Language Skills course offered by the University of Hong Kong is offered to students who have had exposure to English in the classroom but who need additional work to develop skills in using that language. The course aims at providing opportunities for students to familiarize themselves with university activities which are then taken as the contexts for the practice materials. The integrated approach is an eclectic approach, drawing on the notional-functional method that lends itself to English for special purposes, as well as on more traditional types of grammar/vocabulary drill. A two-block course structure recognizes the complexity of language acts, which manifest composite abilities, each of which may be thought of as a subskill. Block one in the structure deals with integrative abilities and requires students to take part in extended project activities requiring them to practice and perform in composite abilities. Block two is a subskills block which aims at improving proficiency in each of the subskills that were called upon in performing the task of block one. Block one immerses students in common academic situations; block two resembles traditional language classroom exercises. Each block makes use of a distinct set of instructional materials and aids. (JB)

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LEARNING AND PERFORMING
an integrated language course at the tertiary level

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss the rationale underlying the design of an 'Integrated Language Skills' course (ILS for short) offered at the University of Hong Kong to a section of the students who need remedial English. The course represents in some ways a new departure from conventional 'remedial' courses at the textiary level. It is *integrated* in a dual sense - it attempts to integrate organically the teaching of the basic language skills, speaking, reading, listening and writing; it also attempts to integrate in a meaningful way *learning* and *performing*. Two interrelated criticisms are often made of most available English language courses, that they are often more concerned with measuring information learners gained from exercise assignments than helping them acquire appropriate strategies for obtaining meaning; and that there often exists a discrepancy between what learners are given, language subskills teaching and measuring, and what is often expected of them in real instances of language communication, performing composite language abilities. The ILS course discussed in this paper aims particularly to overcome these shortcomings.

For some years, the ILS course has been catering for studnets whose test results indicated that their English language proficiency is not sufficient and that they might encounter some difficulty following their course of study in English at the University. The course can be conceived as in a sense "remedial" in nature as well as preparing students for university study. One overriding concern of course design has been student motivation. Students coming to us have already had 12 - 14 years of English instruction, with at least 7 years' experience of being taught in the medium of English. This could have several implications. One, they are sophisticated learners or they would not have succeeded in making their way to university. Two, they have long practised certain language habits and study strategies with English that the English course designer would have to take into consideration if teaching and learning are to be effective. Three, the course is a non-credit course which means it will have to be sufficiently interesting and relevant to student needs before it can compete for student time and attention.

MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS

The ILS course has been conceived and designed on the basis of the following considerations and assumptions:

- (1) That the course designed to improved students' communicative abilities should be contextualised in or at least closely resemble those situations and activities of language performance required of our students, i.e. language and study skills/activities pertaining to university academic study conducted exclusively in English.
- (2) That our students are intelligent adult learners of English who have long practised certain language habits and study strategies though they may not be fully aware of them or of their strengths and deficiencies. The course takes one of its objectives to be helping students become more aware of their own learning and processing strategies and to improve on them. And it goes further. Its principal objective in effect is getting students to exercise the complex application of these strategies as are demanded of them in their study activities. The former objective can perhaps be regarded as the 'remedial' or learning part and is the sub-skills block in the ILS course structure. The latter objective is realised as the actual performance of tasks and is the composite skills block in the course.
- (3) That our students have come through a number of different approaches to English language teaching and learning in school textbooks and that whatever exciting new approaches and methodologies we adopt would have to build on the basis of these former ones even if we may not agree with them. This is desirable if the course is to be truly learner-centered. Bearing in mind the specificity of the Hong Kong student, the course designer adapts those approaches and methodologies she thinks work best with the students and is selective with regard to purpose.
- (4) That apart from giving students practice in seeing and using English as communication, the course also introduces to students some self-learning strategies so that they may have some basis on which they can continue

to improve their English on their own in future. In this respect, the course designer takes the view that giving learners ample practice is not sufficient but an "intellectual leap" with regard to the understanding of language use and communication is necessary. The course attempts to do this by the inclusion of exercises to broaden learner understanding and knowledge of the various macro aspects of language communication. This is considered to be a necessary 'demystification' process to instil in the learner a sense of control over language, and a foreign language at that.

SALIENT FEATURES

In short, the ILS course aims at providing opportunities for students to familiarise them with university study activities/situations which are then taken as the contexts for the design of practice materials for language and study skills. The basic structure of the course consists of a series of integrated study-cycles/activities involving the integration of the four language skills - listening, writing, reading and speaking.

Four salient features of the integrated approach as it has worked out may be noted here. First, it replicates the level of complexity and the integrative nature of the language skills in university study activities. For example in university study, students go to lectures, do reading assignments, take part in tutorial discussions, and are from time to time assigned essay topics requiring them to tackle academic materials in particular ways. These activities are replicated in a systematic way in the ILS course. Second, it makes possible the provision of a consistent known purpose in the processing of the information content throughout the cycle-unit in contrast to most separate language-skill courses in which the student very often encounters one type of material/topic in one lesson and another in the next lesson. The setting up of a known purpose in the form of a project assignment given at the beginning of a cycle-unit serves to chain up in a meaningful way the content materials and the exercises/activities throughout the cycle-unit. Students are thus able to explore a chosen topic in some depth in a way similar to what is

required of them in their academic courses. The ILS course structured in such a way can more easily capture student attention and interest as it appeals to them as being more directly relevant to their study.

Third, it has been found useful to adopt a course design which integrates the language skills because it enables the teachers to switch between different language skills, to "go backwards" in our effort to help learners understand the important features of English language communication. For example, good results have been produced by approaching the teaching of listening to and comprehending spoken English through, among other things, a clear understanding of the sociolinguistic, sociocultural parameters of speaking and of spoken English communication. In a similar way, certain aspects of academic reading and writing are dealt with integratively. This was introduced by sensitizing learners to certain types of academic written discourse to help them understand how ideas are generally elaborated and communicated in academic writing, and through such an understanding to decide on how academic writing could be processed in reading. Such an approach has greatly encouraged the development of learner awareness of the interrelationship between production and reception and how the learning of one could facilitate and reinforce the learning of the other.

The fourth feature is one of getting students to exercise integrative composite abilities in communicative situations. One frequent complaint of students in a discussion situation is that they do not listen to one another and do not interact sufficiently with one another. This may be due to insufficient practice in integrative processing and performance of communicative and language abilities, possibly because of the absence of demand on them in the single language-skill courses they were used to in school. An example may explain what this means. The notion of disagreement is dealt with in many speaking skills textbooks. In many cases, the language items of disagreement are presented and illustrated in situations, often with levels of formality and range of disagreement to be followed by various types of controlled practice. But it should be realised that getting learners ^{to} master the language and context of disagreement is quite different from expecting them to be able to disagree in a discussion. When a speaker in a discussion situation produces an utterance

signifying disagreement, he is in actual fact displaying a range of highly complex abilities: on the linguistic side, being able to decipher meaning from form to understand what the previous speaker says; on the processing and production side, it is one of knowing the topic being discussed thoroughly well, of comprehending the previous speaker's position through understanding what he says and what he chooses not to say, of seeing the discrepancy between what one hears and understands and what one holds, of deciding on the need to disagree, of knowing and being able to say what and why one disagrees with and possibly putting forth one's support for disagreeing, etc etc. A very complex set of active processing, thinking, decision-making activities is involved without which the disagreement utterance, albeit a very simple one, can never take place. This is referred to in this paper as composite abilities or composite skills, and each of their inherent items a subskill. The distinction is useful in two senses. One, it serves to hammer home the point that there exists a discrepancy between what learners are often expected to be able to do, i.e. performing composite abilities, and what our course books and teaching usually give them, dealing mainly with discrete-point or subskill teaching and learning. Two, there appears to be an urgent need to attempt an integration of the two in teaching and in course design such that learners get the right level of practice expected of them and understand the real mechanisms involved - vitally important if future self-learning is to be facilitated. The two-block organisation in the ILS course design represents one attempt to reconcile these various demands made on the learner.

TWO-BLOCK STRUCTURE

Broadly speaking, the ILS course structure adopts an organic integration of two broad categories of language/study skills, composite skills and a number of selected subskills which make up the composite skills. Block one in the course structure deals primarily with integrative, composite abilities and is the PROJECT (or tasks) block in which students take part in extended project activities requiring them to practice and perform in composite abilities. Block two is the SUBSKILLS block which aims at improving student

awareness of and proficiency in the various subskills which contribute to improved overall communicative performance in block one. Exercises in the subskills block generally take the form of short language sensitising exercises, drills and practice, game simulations and each session is quite self-contained by itself. The same teacher stays with the group throughout the project block to monitor student performance, and the subskills block can take in two or three teachers. The academic year is divided into a number of segments and each segment is allocated twenty or thirty hours. The course specifies one or two project tasks for each segment and teaching and learning are built around them. A schematic outline of the course is given below.

COURSE CONTENT

	BLOCK 1 : COMPOSITE SKILLS (2 sessions per week)	BLOCK 2 : SUBSKILLS (2 sessions per week)
Segment 1	Composite listening and speaking skills practice and the production of two 10-minute video drama incorporating formal and informal language situations.	Subskills exercises and practice leading to the performance of activities in Block 1.
Segment 2	Composite reading and writing skills practice and the completion of a writing project involving the synthesis and evaluation of different points of view on a topic.	"
Segment 3	Composite listening and speaking skills practice and the production of two 15-minute informed video discussion incorporating the presentation of research on a selected topic and the debates or the exchange of views between different speaker-roles.	"
Segment 4	Composite reading and writing skills practice and the completion of a writing project involving the interpretation of an argument and tackling it critically and substantively.	"

Segment 1 - MATERIALS

	BLOCK 1 : COMPOSITE SKILLS	BLOCK 2 : SUBSKILLS
Segment 1 Video drama (20 hours)	Video exercise units; Jig-saw listening units; Manipulating the voice and dialogue reading; Semi-script, grid and dialogue composing; Video production (competition)	Notional units; Dramatic monologues and processing units; Stress and pause units; Intonation & tonic syllabus units; Lab self-help units

Segment 2 - MATERIALS

	BLOCK 1 : COMPOSITE SKILLS	BLOCK 2 : SUBSKILLS
Segment 2 Writing project - synthesis and evaluation (30 hours)	<i>Bilingual units</i> to develop awareness of some of the cultural differences in English and Chinese writing esp discourse, making a point, and levels of assertiveness. <i>Short reading projects</i> reading academic articles with examples of synthesis and evaluation. <i>Proof-reading exercise units</i> <i>Writing projects</i> (display) e.g. The Iranian Crisis (History) Town Planning (Geography) <i>Follow-up remedial units bank</i>	<i>Making a point unit</i> Making a point & supporting it ; Making a point - levels of exposition; Making a point in an argument; Making a point as evaluation; Comparing & contrasting as evaluation. <i>Levels of assertiveness</i> <i>Referring to the author</i> <i>Conceptual units</i> (remedial units bank) comparison, degree; time development; cause, result, purpose, reason, contrast, condition, etc. <i>Cohesion units</i> (remedial units bank) <i>Abstracting units</i>

Example of a crude breakdown of skills of segment 3:

Block 1 : Composite Skills	Block 2 : Subskills
<i>Major perceptive abilities</i> awareness of rules of interaction and sociolinguistic parameters; guessing and anticipating in listening; processing information; interpreting information; <i>Major abstracting abilities</i> restating what one hears; summarising; condensing a point; <i>Major performance abilities</i> interacting appropriately; presenting factual information; stating and supporting one's position; reiterating one's view; exaggerating/downplaying with a purpose; retreating from an untenable position; admitting error in facts/view; stating own view in relation to others; etc.	Exercises to develop understanding of this type of spoken discourse: linguistic and non-linguistic; main and supporting ideas; generalisation and support; levels of generality; irrelevant information; rules of interaction; sociolinguistic parameters of English communication; Exercise in active processing and the formulation and evaluation of hypotheses in comprehension; Exercises to develop student ability to link language/speaker/topic/role/context/information/intention etc. in interpreting and communicating apart from attending to formal meaning; Identify and state other speakers' attitudes; state and support own position; Notional units to better manipulate language and function in comprehension and production; etc.

One obvious advantage of this two-block course structure is the built-in co-ordination between what are required of composite abilities in student communicative study activities, replicated in project activities in block one and selected from a profile of student needs, and the kind of processing, communicative functions and remedial language work that have to be worked on. It should be apparent that the teaching and practice items in the subskills block are determined by and subordinated to fulfilling the needs of successful performance of the composite skills block. Teaching and communication could then be integrated, contextualised, and purposeful without which the discussion and practice of language use would have to be conducted in a vacuum or would never surface. It has the added advantages of helping students to make sense of what they are doing, vitally important for an advanced English programme of this kind, and providing the contexts and language areas to do remedial work on. As materials designer and teacher, one is not only concerned with training students to become more proficient in manipulating those subskills that help them do better, but is also concerned with giving them practice and improving those composite skills that enable them to respond successfully to real communicative needs. It should be apparent that the integrated language skills course owes much to the framework of course design of English for Specific Purposes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Students who come to us generally have a passive knowledge of the rules of grammar and a large stock of language items but they are generally not aware of their communicative value. Coupled with insufficient practice in the use of the language, appropriate language use has often posed serious difficulties. One important task for the course designer and teacher then is to improve student knowledge and production of language use especially in terms of contextual appropriacy. This necessitates approaching linguistic form from the standpoint of meaning, treating discourse explicitly, and sensitising learners to the sociocultural parameters of

language communication. The organisation of an integrated course has proved to be an efficient framework to operate in. It encounters less problems in motivating students because it represents a new departure from the English language teaching normally being practised in school and the project approach - based firmly on group work with the teacher acting as guide and counsellor - has given rise to a new kind of working and learning atmosphere that encourages purposeful communication and interaction. The most important contribution, as those of us involved in the programme see it, is pitching the course at a sufficiently high level - both linguistically and intellectually - that requires the learners to operate in complex composite abilities, in contrast to the often oversimplified, artificial discrete-item language teaching and learning they were accustomed to in school. This is not to suggest that the latter should not have a place in the language course curriculum but the issue remains as to how best to integrate these subskills teaching and learning and the performance of meaningful composite abilities. The integrated course design described above might represent a possible direction.

The course also has its share of problems. A student-centred course of this kind is generally demanding on the materials writer and teacher especially when its success and smooth operation depend greatly on student initiative and motivation. We generally got round this by inviting students to choose their own project topics and involving them to participate in the selection of some of the content materials and in the evaluation of their own performance. The inclusion of a competition element or joint project display with other classes as an end purpose to the segment - putting together a news sheet, for example, or a small-scale television documentary - has greatly improved student motivation as practice and activities can then be chained up purposefully and meaningfully and where also student motivation can be maximised. As we have attempted to inject 'authenticity' to the remedial language work we do with students, the

teacher's monitoring of student performance would have to be very efficient. We also need to have available a large stock of remedial language exercise materials to which teachers can draw from when the need arises. A third difficulty has to do with the actual operation in class - how much control or flexibility is to be exercised particularly in cueing the language learnt and in correcting student errors. Much more effort should still be channelled into investigating more efficient and interesting ways of integration than the present one, and understanding the language and cognitive processing skills involved in each of the communicative activities, represented here by the componential breakdown of the so-called subskills.